

Communication Activities Plan

I. Introduction

The Virginia Department of Health (VDH) considers arboviruses (WNV, EEE, LAC and SLE) a threat to public health. West Nile virus was first confirmed in seven crows in Virginia in 2000 and the first human case of the disease in Virginia was reported in 2002. EEE was first reported in humans in Virginia in 1975. The first human case of LAC was reported in the state in 1996. SLE was first reported in humans in Virginia in 1975. It is possible that these viruses were present in Virginia prior to the first reports but were not detected due to the lack of technology at that time to identify specific diseases. Testing for all of these diseases has increased due to the interest in WNV so more cases are likely to be identified. Public awareness and prevention education are two important components of reducing the potential threat to public health and safety in the Commonwealth. Communications strategies are needed to help the public reduce outdoor water sources where mosquitoes breed and to help people reduce their risk of being bitten by mosquitoes. Additional strategies are needed to educate health care providers about the virus and the prevention of disease and about the diagnosis and treatment of arbovirus diseases in humans. Also, there exists a need to provide information emphasizing the role of county and municipal mosquito control plans, as well as recommendations for developing such a plan, for localities and municipal governments. Should pesticide fogging become necessary in areas that have not traditionally had experience with spraying, public education on the safety of such products will be required.

II. Objective

To provide an appropriate protocol for informing and educating local, state and federal government agencies, the media, and the public.

III. Implementation Plan

A. General

The VDH including its local health departments across the state will work in collaboration with the Virginia Departments of Game and Inland Fisheries; Emergency Management; Conservation and Recreation; Environmental Quality; and Agriculture and Consumer Services; and local governments and mosquito control authorities. Working together the agencies will advise the public and health care providers of potential and actual threats to their health through a multi-level information campaign about mosquito borne diseases. Sample news releases (positive bird and probable human), flier, brochures (English and Spanish) and fact sheet (Attachments [5.A](#), [5.B](#), [5.C](#), [5.D](#), [5.E](#), [5.F](#)) will be distributed.

B. Notification and Release of Information

Rapid sharing of surveillance results with government agencies and the public is essential for the development of appropriate disease prevention and control measures. VDH will release only the following details about human cases: county/city, case status (confirmed or probable) and date of illness onset. However, release of more detailed information of individual human cases is left to the discretion of health districts and Local Health Departments (LHD) as deemed appropriate and necessary. Some confidentiality should attach to identification of affected privately owned animals to assure individual privacy of the owner and the treating veterinarian, if any. Therefore, to encourage reporting, owners' names and street addresses, treating veterinarians' names and street addresses, and names and addresses of persons submitting specimens shall be kept confidential. Information that will be available to agencies and the public with respect to privately owned animals will include the town and county where the specimen was collected, the species, the date of collection, and the arbovirus test results. VDH Office of Epidemiology will inform LHD of positive human, avian and mammal laboratory results from their respective jurisdictions. The LHD is responsible for releasing information on positive human and avian cases to physicians caring for human cases, citizens or organizations that submitted positive birds, and the media. VDACS will notify the Office of Epidemiology and submitting veterinarians and/or animal owners and will work with the Office of Epidemiology and the involved LHD to notify local government, the media, and the public. Initial announcement of probable/confirmed human cases will originate from the LHD. However, in the event that such information has not been released to the media within 48 hours of receipt of the report, the VDH may and will provide this information directly to the public by posting the report to the VDH external Web site and will confirm the report to media when queried. Neither the LHD nor VDH will release information about human cases of arboviruses prior to confirming that the patient and the physician have been informed. All probable and confirmed human cases will be considered releasable information.

C. Activities

1. Winter, spring; no current WNV activity

- a. VDH prepares a pre-mosquito season information campaign to educate the public about arboviruses, mosquito control and personal protection. (using press release, public service announcement, educational materials and possibly speaking opportunities)

- b. VDH updates information about arboviruses on the VDH website.
- c. VDH shares information on pre-season activities to reduce mosquito breeding areas to the public via the VDH Health Beat on line newsletter.
- d. VDH distributes news release to all media in Virginia about mosquito borne diseases, preventing mosquito breeding around the home, and protecting public health.
- e. Office of Epidemiology and DCLS develop information for health care providers about arbovirus symptoms and criteria for laboratory testing and submitting specimens.
- f. VDH coordinates with other agency public relations (PR) staff members and with the Metropolitan Washington Council on Governments (COG) on the public awareness campaign. The VDH Northern Virginia Public Relations Coordinator will be the key VDH PR contact for COG meetings held in Northern Virginia.
- g. Office of Epidemiology updates and supplies brochures, fact sheets, and fliers for LHDs to send out to community organizations for distribution and posting.
- h. Office of Epidemiology PIO coordinates development of key messages (including changes in collection and testing of birds) with VDH Regional PIOs to allow for better localization of prevention messages throughout the state.

2. Spring, summer, fall; limited arboviral epizootic activity in birds and/or mosquitoes

- a. VDH continues statewide information campaign on how to protect people, reduce mosquitoes, detect arbovirus symptoms and, if applicable, how and when to report dead birds. Follow-up interviews are conducted.
- b. LHDs inform health care providers about arbovirus symptoms.
- c. LHDs send out news releases and conduct media follow-up calls and interviews on the increased mosquito threat that warmer weather brings, how to protect oneself from all arboviruses, and the reporting of dead birds. LHDs will

notify the appropriate VDH Regional PIO of any news releases and may request their assistance with drafting releases or managing media inquiries.

- d. LHDs develop a communications plan for potential arbovirus virus cases in the area.
- e. Each state agency represented on the task force reminds appropriate staff on handling calls and emergency procedures for arboviruses.
- f. Office of Epidemiology PIO obtains news clippings of arbovirus stories in Virginia, shares those with Regional PIOs and provides periodic analysis of quantity and quality.
- g. State agency communications staff creates and distributes appropriate news releases on arboviruses pertaining to that agency's area of expertise.

3. Spring, summer fall; areas with initial confirmation of WNV in a horse or human, or escalating WNV activity in birds and/or mosquitoes

- a. LHD advises local media immediately of confirmed human case(s) via press release.
- b. LHD notifies OE PIO and appropriate regional PIO immediately of media release and supplies a copy of any release to those individuals.
- c. LHDs (with assistance from Regional PIOs if appropriate) contact local broadcast stations (TV & radio) to set up local media interviews. Encourage prevention and protection.
- d. Office of Epidemiology updates VDH web site. Arboviruses are placed on first page of site.
- e. PIO notifies other state agency PR/Communications staff of significant events or changes in arbovirus status within the state.

4. Human disease outbreak

- a. If needed, VDH requests Emergency Management (VDEM) to open state Public Inquiry Center (PIC) and puts emergency communications procedures into place.

- b. VDH, LHDs and regional PIOs collaborate on plans for communication with the public.
- c. VDH conducts follow-up interviews.
- d. If fogging via truck or air is recommended in areas not routinely doing adulticiding, VDH or LHD, with assistance from the Office of Epidemiology, distributes news releases on the effects of the chemicals to be used and the proposed treatment areas.
- e. Office of Epidemiology updates VDH web site.
- f. Affected Local Health Directors hold local news conferences with assistance from PR staff.
- g. LHDs affected are assisted by Regional PIO in tailoring of sample news releases and in conducting interviews.
- h. VDH Central Office and the VDES work with LHDs to set up local hotlines for public inquiries about possible spraying and schedules.
- i. Statewide toll-free telephone number is considered.
- j. VDACS notifies beekeepers of spraying information.

IV. Evaluation

After frost, involved state agencies and LHDs evaluate success of information activities and arbovirus media coverage. A summary of this evaluation will be made available to LHDs and other agencies.